

Guardians

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Summary: After Hercules leaves the academy with Zeus, Iolaus and Jason are suspicious and follow them.

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A Young Hercules Fanfic

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Guardians Part One

Hercules jogged into the academy barracks, he had offered to go and search for a bag that Jason claimed to have forgotten that morning. He was still looking for the errant satchel when a blinding flash filled the empty barracks.

It grabbed Hercules' attention in an instant, and the young cadet was immediately on the alert. When his eyes adjusted to the again dim interior, the demigod's mouth dropped open when he found himself facing an older man who remarkably resembled the sculptures of Zeus.

"Are you . . ." he stammered, unsure what to say.

The man nodded, "Zeus? Yes, that would be me."

Hercules blinked slowly, "You're really here."

"Yes, I'm really here. I think we've established that. I've watched

you for a long time, Hercules," the king of the gods said.

"Really?" Hercules asked, still not quite believing that the man he had so long sought to meet was truly standing right in front of him.

The god nodded, "Of course, you are my son, after all. I've come to ask if you would like to accompany me on a journey."

Hercules' brow scrunched in confusion. "On a journey? Why would you need to journey somewhere? Don't you just sort of appear places like just now?"

"Usually that would be true, but not always. Besides, I would like to have the opportunity to speak with you."

Grinning, Hercules replied eagerly, "When would we leave?"

"Right away," Zeus answered shortly.

"I'll need to speak with Chieron," Hercules said.

The god shook his head, "I've already done that, Hercules. Everything is arranged. We can leave whenever you're ready."

"Just let me get my satchel then," the cadet replied, "I left it in the drill room." He had turned to leave when he remembered why he was in the dorm to begin with. Looking around, he finally spotted Jason's bag and grabbed it.

Quickly, Hercules crossed the distance between the barracks and the drill room. Rushing into the room, he spotted Jason and Iolaus and hurried over to them. "Here's your bag, Jason," he said before picking up his own satchel from the floor.

Hercules had turned to leave when Jason spoke up, "And just where do you think you're going, Hercules?"

"Yeah, you can't take off in the middle of training," Iolaus added.

Turning, Hercules looked back at Iolaus and Jason. "I have to go away for a little while," was his simple explanation.

Iolaus frowned, asking, "What do you mean you're going away for a little while? You know Chieron won't let you just leave."

"It's already been cleared with Chieron, Iolaus," Hercules responded.

"Then why is this the first we've heard about it?" Jason asked. "It's not like you to keep secrets, Hercules."

Hercules shook his head, eager to get back to where his father was waiting. "It sorta just came up, Jase. I really need to go." With that, he turned and quickly left the room, missing the concerned looks on his two friends' faces.

"Something's not right here, Jase," Iolaus observed.

Jason crossed his arms over his chest. "I wondered if you noticed that, too."

Iolaus glanced out of the window in time to see Hercules rounding the first bend in the road from the academy. "Who is he with, anyway?" he asked, gesturing toward the old man that accompanied Hercules.

"I have no idea," Jason said, shrugging.

"Should we follow him?" Iolaus asked.

Jason dropped his arms to his side and walked over to the window. "Let's go talk to Chieron first, maybe this really is legit."

"Okay," Iolaus relented, "we talk to Chieron, but either way we're going after Herc. I've got a bad feeling about this, Jase."

Jason nodded, "So do I, Iolaus. So do I."

As Hercules and Zeus walked down the dirt path from the academy, Hercules still couldn't believe that it was really happening. He hardly stopped talking the entire time, and found himself laughing inwardly at his sudden likeness to Iolaus, who was usually the one to talk constantly.

"So where are we going?" Hercules asked.

Zeus shook his head, "You'll see when we get there, Son."

"I guess," he agreed sullenly. Zeus' constant avoidance of his questions tickled a nerve in the back of his head.

"I'm sorry, Hercules," Zeus relented, "but this really will be much better if you wait until we arrive to see it."

Slightly confused by Zeus' comment, Hercules merely nodded in response. For the moment, silence fell over the two travelers as they pressed on toward an unknown, to Hercules anyway, destination.

Meanwhile, it took Iolaus and Jason only a few minutes to find Chieron in his office. Knocking on the door, Jason stuck his head into the headmaster's office. "Yes, Jason?" the centaur asked.

Iolaus followed Jason into the room, slightly less comfortable being there. "We were wondering about Hercules," Iolaus asked.

Chieron placed down the papers he had been reading and looked closely at the two cadets. "What about him, Iolaus?"

"He left," Jason answered instead.

"What do you mean he left?" the headmaster asked.

Iolaus sighed, "I knew something was up."

Chieron looked between the two young men before Jason said, "He said

that you had cleared it for him to leave."

"This is the first I've heard of it, Jason. Why don't the two of you tell me what else Hercules said before he left."

"Only that he had to leave, and that it had just came up," Jason said.

Iolaus crossed his arms, saying "Nothing was strange until he went to the barracks for Jason's bag. Then all of a sudden he had to leave."

"Did you see if he was with anyone?" Chieron asked.

Jason nodded, "An old man, by the look of it."

"Anyone you recognized?" Chieron pressed.

Iolaus opened his mouth to speak, but closed it, mumbling, "Nah, couldn't be."

Chieron's gaze settled on Iolaus. "Couldn't be what, Iolaus?"

The blond half-laughed, replying, "Well, the guy looked sorta like that sculpture of Zeus you showed us in class."

"But how could we see him, then?" Jason asked. He paused, and looked over at Iolaus. "Wait, you paid attention in class? I'm shocked."

"Herc kind of made it hard to pay attention that day, Jase," Iolaus said, interrupting Chieron's attempt to speak. "Sorry, Chieron," he added hastily.

"Thank you," the centaur said. "Back to what we were discussing. Are you sure it looked like Zeus?"

"Who else would he drop everything to follow?" Jason muttered.

"Sorry, Jason?" Chieron asked.

Jason glanced up at the headmaster. "I said it's the only answer that makes sense, Sir."

"You may have a point there," Chieron said. "What do you think should be done?"

"I think we should follow them," Iolaus replied.

Chieron nodded at Iolaus' suggestion, and turned his attention to Jason, "And what do you think should be done, Jason?"

The dark-haired cadet was silent for a moment. "If it really is Zeus, and we follow them, Hercules will probably be upset." Jason glanced over at Iolaus and back up at Chieron before finishing. "I think we should follow them anyway."

The headmaster nodded, "Gather your things." The two cadets had turned and were half way through the door when Chieron added, "But if

you find them and it is clear that it truly is Zeus, I want you to come back, understood?"

Iolaus and Jason nodded. "Yes, Sir," they said in unison.

"Dismissed, and good luck," Chieron said, watching them disappear into the hallway.

As Jason and Iolaus were hurrying to gather their gear, Hercules and Zeus continued walking down a road toward the west.

"See that mountain range?" Zeus asked, pointing toward a line of mountains that were looming larger in their sight the longer they walked. When Hercules nodded, the god continued, "That is our destination."

Confused, Hercules asked, "What's there?"

Zeus smiled, an almost cold smile. "You'll see."

Blinded by his need to believe in his father caring about him, Hercules didn't see the cruel glint that flashed in the old god's eyes as he spoke the words. Instead, Hercules focused his attention on the mountains, anxious to see what it was that his father wanted to share.

"Are you sure they went west at the crossroads, Iolaus?" Jason asked after they had been walking for some time.

Iolaus glanced over at Jason, "Yeah I'm sure, why?"

"It's just that we haven't seen anyone in ages," Jason replied. "Besides the fact that Hercules and Zeus, or whoever it is, shouldn't have that much of a head start on us."

Iolaus examined the marks of the traffic on the dusty road as they walked. He waited a few seconds before responding. "We're going the right way, I'm positive." Looking over at Jason with a grin on his face, he added, "Don't doubt my abilities as a tracker, City-boy."

Switching his bag to his other shoulder, Jason looked at Iolaus with mock indignation on his face. "Did you just call me a city-boy, Shorty?"

"Ah yes, I believe I did," Iolaus responded. "And who are you calling shorty? You barely have two inches on me."

Jason laughed, "Is that what it looks like from down there? Because I would swear it was a lot more."

Iolaus scoffed, "No, that's only when you're on your royal high-horse."

"Sorry, what was that? The wind blew and your words didn't make it up this high," Jason baited with a grin.

Suddenly serious, Iolaus commented, "Jase, I know that was one of your thin attempts at humor, but the wind really does feel funny."

His smile fading, Jason concentrated on what Iolaus was talking about. "You're right. This time of year the wind shouldn't be this strong from the north."

"Trouble?" Iolaus asked.

Jason nodded, "Looks like it."

"I'll take that as a compliment," echoed a cold feminine voice.

When the red-clad goddess materialized, Iolaus and Jason said, "Discord."

"One and only, boys," the goddess laughed.

Iolaus threw up his hands, "How is it the only female members of Herc's family that we meet are the crazy ones?"

"I don't recall many of the guys being much better off, Iolaus," Jason observed, his wary gaze never leaving Discord.

"Oh, yeah. You've got a point," Iolaus said.

Hands on her hips, Discord pouted, "Hello? Boys? Remember me?"

"Oh, you're still here," Iolaus baited.

A sound similar to a growl came from Discord's throat and she said, "I'll show you still here, short-stuff."

"Great, another height joke. Gee, Discord, I've never heard that one before," Iolaus commented dryly.

Laughing evilly, Discord reached out her hand and a bolt of blue energy shot forward and hit Iolaus square in the chest. "Still feeling witty, little boy?"

Jason watched as Iolaus was tossed back ten feet on the road and landed flat on his back. Pulling his sword from its sheathe, he advanced on the smirking goddess. "We really don't have time for this, Discord."

"That would be the idea, wouldn't it?" she smiled sweetly. "And do you really think that will help you?" With a flick of her wrist, his sword was pried from his grasp and thrown across the road and into the brush. "Want more?" she asked, licking her lips.

Iolaus had just struggled to sit up when he saw Jason being thrown off the road in the same direction of his sword. Standing, he too pulled a sword. "Out of our way, Discord," Iolaus ordered, not caring how silly it must sound to the goddess.

"I must say, I like it when they keep coming back for more," Discord purred. "Let's see. What shall I do for a little variety?" Her smile widened as she snapped her fingers. In an instant, both Iolaus and Jason, who had just gotten back on his feet, were caught in the middle of a blinding windstorm.

Both Iolaus and Jason closed their eyes against the driving sand. Iolaus reached out a blind arm to try and find Discord, but encountered only more sand.

"Iolaus?" Jason called out into the wind, coughing on the dust that drove its way into his mouth and lungs.

Hearing Jason's cry, Iolaus turned in the direction it sounded like it came from. "Over here," he managed around a mouthful of sand, walking toward the other cadet's voice.

They could each hear Discords enchanted laughter, obviously enjoying the chaotic scene she had created. "Oh, dear. It needs something more," she said, mostly to herself.

After fumbling blindly in the windstorm, Iolaus and Jason finally found one another. "Where's the edge?" Jason yelled above the noise.

"Just walk, we have to hit it eventually," Iolaus yelled back, still coughing on the relentless sand.

"Ah, yes!" Discord cried suddenly. "I know what will be good."

"Uh, Jase?" Iolaus asked after hearing Discord yell.

Grabbing onto Iolaus' arm, Jason shouted, "That means no good. Run!"

Neither had taken two steps when Discord's evil laughter filled their ears and they found themselves suddenly free of the sandstorm. In the eerie calm that followed, Jason and Iolaus struggled to blink the sand from their eyes and prepare for what the mischievous goddess was planning.

"Nighty-night, boys," her voice echoed.

"What does that mean?" Jason asked before Iolaus pushed him to the ground. "Hey, what was that . . ." He didn't finish his question as he watched a log swing out from the forest that bordered the road and hit Iolaus in the chest. "Iolaus!" he called out when his friend was flung across the road and didn't move.

Jason was half-way to where Iolaus had fallen when Discord spoke up again. "Now, Princy, I would hate for you to feel left out." A swirl of smoke appeared around Jason and within an instant, he dropped to the ground near Iolaus, unconscious.

Discord materialized, bending over the two cadets, and observed her handiwork. "I'd say he owes me one," she laughed, again disappearing.

The hour was growing late when Hercules and Zeus finally reached the foothills of the Escala Mountains. "Are we going to stop for the night?" Hercules asked, growing tired from the fast-paced journey.

Zeus turned to look at his son, "It is not much further, Hercules. Perhaps we could press on for a while longer."

Hercules nodded, and drew on his demigod strength to press on. "Then how about something to eat?"

"Can you walk and eat?" Zeus asked after a moment's consideration.

"I suppose," Hercules said. His mind was in a battle between blind devotion to the man he longed to call father, and the strange behavior of the same man. Zeus nodded, and snapped his fingers. An instant later, Hercules found himself holding some bread, cheese and a glass of water. "Thanks," he said before taking a bite of the bread.

The sun had just dipped below the horizon when Zeus pointed out a faintly lit cavern removed from any of the paths in the mountains. "That is where we are going," he said, pointing.

Hercules squinted to make out any detail of the cave. "What is it?"

"A very special place," was the god's only response.

Travel was rough over the jagged rocks that lay between the path and the cavern. Hercules winced as he slashed his hand on one of the sharp rocks. However, turning back never crossed his mind. He watched as Zeus easily climbed over the cluttered stones, attributing it to his being a full god.

"Just a little further," Zeus assured him after some time.

In the deepening darkness, Hercules was beginning to stumble more and more often. "It would be easier if the moon was out," Hercules observed.

"We're here," Zeus said suddenly a few moments later.

When Hercules cleared one last large boulder, he saw the massive cavern entrance that Zeus had first pointed out from the path. "Are we going inside?" Hercules asked.

Zeus laughed humorlessly, "Of course. Why else did we come all this way?"

"You've got a good point there," Hercules admitted.

Entering the cave, the god said quietly, "It took you long enough."

Also walking into the cave to stand next to his father, Hercules asked, "What did you say? I missed it."

"Nothing of importance, Son," Zeus replied. "Come, it is still a little way further."

Hercules squinted, trying to make out any detail of the cave's interior. The faint glow he had seen from outside was now brighter; but faint enough that it could easily be overlooked in daylight, he noted. He could see the light came from somewhere down the second of four passages that lined the far wall.

"After you," was Hercules' response.

With a nod, the older god turned and walked through the passageway that the light was coming from. With one last glance around the cave entrance, Hercules followed Zeus deeper into the caverns.

Rounding a sharp corner in the stone passage, Hercules was able to see past Zeus into a large cavern which was glowing brightly. "Is that where we're going?"

Zeus nodded. "Oh yes, it is," he said coolly. When they at last entered the large room, Zeus moved quickly so as to block any avenue of escape for the young demigod.

"What?" Hercules asked, looking around the cavern. From the center on the floor dissolved into a bubbling lava flow. "Why are we here?" he asked, turning to face Zeus.

"Just a little fun," he cackled. As Hercules watched, his hopes for his father faded as the old man changed into the more familiar features of Strife. "I must say, you played along better than I'd ever imagined."

Hercules eyed the doorway behind Strife, and made a run for it, only to be halted when the young god laughed and struck out a hand. "Sorry, I don't think so."

Strife snapped his fingers, and Hercules suddenly found himself hanging by a rope over the center of the steaming lava. "Strife!" he called angrily, clenching his fists around the rope to which they were tied, all that was holding him from plunging into the fiery depths below.

The crazed laughter of the young god echoing around the chamber was his only answer.

Iolaus groaned as he slowly fought his way back to consciousness. It was only after he tried to sit up that he realized he was pinned to the ground by a large object. His head spinning, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Opening his eyes, he realized that it was part of a large tree that was on top of him.

"Jason?" he called out, coughing. When the other cadet didn't respond, Iolaus grew concerned for what might have happened to him. With some effort he was able to see over the log to where Jason was lying in the middle of the road some distance away. "Hey, Jase?" he called out again, hoping to wake the unconscious crown prince.

A moment later, Iolaus heard a weak cough. For an instant he was worried that he had imagined the sound. The small cadet was then doubly relieved when he saw Jason stir slightly. When he was sure that Jason was finally regaining consciousness, Iolaus allowed his head to drop back onto the ground.

Jason groaned as he pushed himself up off of the ground. Sitting up, he found himself racked by a coughing fit. His lungs and throat burned both from the sand and whatever it was that Discord had hit him with. A quick glance around the path, and Jason's gaze fell onto Iolaus, or rather, what he could see of him.

Unsteadily, Jason crawled over to where Iolaus was trapped beneath the tree. "Iolaus?" he called out, his voice rough. "You awake?"

Jason had just crawled around to where he could see Iolaus' face when the blond smirked, "No, I thought now was a good time for a little cat-nap." After a moment he continued, "So, are you going to help me out here?"

"I guess I have to, or you'll never shut up," Jason said, weak humor in his voice. "When I lift the tree up, you have to slide out on your own, Iolaus."

Iolaus nodded, "Whatever, lets just get this over with."

Jason pushed with all the strength he could manage, finally succeeding in freeing the log from Iolaus, who in turn used his arms to pull himself the rest of the way free. Once the blond was clear of the tree trunk, both Jason and Iolaus dropped wearily onto the ground and worked to regain their breath.

"So what happened exactly?" Iolaus asked. "The last thing I remember was Discord swinging that tree at you."

"Which you preceded to jump in front of, I might add," Jason commented. Running his hands through his dusty hair, Jason added, "Thanks, by the way."

"Yeah, well," Iolaus shrugged, "I knew I had the harder head."

Jason laughed, managing to stand up shakily. "Uh, huh. You're probably right about that. But anyway, after she hit you, she turned on me with some strange fog."

"Fog?" Iolaus asked incredulously.

Jason shrugged, looking around the path. "I don't know. All I know is that I was out in a second." Turning his attention back to Iolaus, Jason held out his hand when he noticed the other cadet had yet to stand up.

Taking the offered hand, Iolaus pulled himself up onto his feet. He swayed for a moment before dropping back onto the ground. He grabbed a hold of his knee, and closed his eyes against the pain that radiated up from his leg.

Dropping down next to his friend, Jason asked, concerned, "What's wrong?"

"That blasted tree wrenched my knee," Iolaus said through clenched teeth.

Jason nodded, "We have to get you back to the academy." Standing, he walked into the forest and soon returned with two branches to form a meager splint. "Hold still."

Iolaus watched as Jason bandaged his leg before saying, "I'm not going back, Jason."

"Iolaus . . ." the older cadet protested, looking at his friend's serious eyes.

Iolaus shook his head defiantly. "You know as well as I do that Discord showing up was no coincidence." When Jason remained silent, the blond added in a low voice, "Herc needs both of us, Jase."

With a nod of his head, Jason finished bandaging Iolaus' knee and stood, turning he disappeared back into the forest. When he returned he was carrying two long, sturdy branches. "Think you can walk it on crutches?"

Taking the offered support, Iolaus replied, "I'll have to, now won't I?"

After making sure that Iolaus was standing as steadily as he could manage, Jason turned his attention to the road. "That little dust storm washed out all the tracks," he noted.

"We keep heading west for the time being," Iolaus said, looking as far down the road as he could manage. "We'll pick them back up eventually."

Jason shook his head, "Can you track in the dark?"

"I'll have to," was Iolaus' only reply.

"Oh I do think Ares will be impressed," Strife gloated to Hercules, who was still hanging over the steaming lava.

Hercules flexed his hands as best he could around the rope, and again examined what he could see of his mountain prison. "I don't know, Strife," the demigod said. "He might not like your stealing his fun."

"Well now, I hardly think that," Strife boasted. "No, dear uncle will be quite pleased."

Hercules shook his head, trying to keep the sweat that was streaming down his face from flowing into his eyes. "What would Zeus say about your impersonating him?" he asked, wincing as his injured hand dug into the coarse rope.

Strife's hollow laughter echoed around the cave. "Do you really think your dear old daddy cares about that?" The god paused, letting his words sink in before adding, "Well, even if you do, he must not. I mean, wouldn't he be here otherwise?"

Shaking his head, Hercules tried not to hear Strife's words. He didn't want to believe that his father didn't care at all. "And how would you know, Strife?" he baited. "It's not like underling gods like you ever talk to the king of the gods."

"How dare you. You . . . You little half-god," Strife stammered. "Who are you to talk to me like that?" In his fury, a bolt of lightning shot out from his hand, striking the center of the lava flow. In an instant, the steaming of the rock increased.

"Come on, Strife," Hercules called out, eyeing the steaming rock

warily. "Too scared to fight me like a real man?"

Turning his cold gaze upon Hercules, Strife grinned wickedly, sending a shudder up and down the demigod's spine. "Oh I would be careful how much you talk up there, godling," the mischievous god taunted.

"There's one little thing I forgot to tell you. You see the steam coming from the lava?" He watched as Hercules' eyes darted between the lava and his face. "Yes, I see you have. Well, it's poison. To mortals anyway."

"What . . ." Hercules asked.

"Oh, I if I were you I wouldn't worry too much," Strife sneered. "I mean, you are a son of Zeus after all. Now, your little friends on the other hand . . ."

Hercules had opened his mouth to comment when a shimmering appeared in the cave next to Strife. "Don't worry about those two. They're taken care of."

Hercules' mouth dropped open. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, little brother, that they are out of the picture," the goddess gloated.

"You didn't . . ."

Discord smiled, "Kill them? No. I just had a little fun."

Hercules' jaw clenched, "I swear if you hurt them, Discord."

"You'll do what, Hercules?" she taunted. "Dangle there and annoy me?" The mingled laughter of the two lesser gods filled the chamber. Hercules' internal clock told him it was nearing dawn, and he closed his eyes hoping for his friends safety, wherever they were

During this time, Jason and Iolaus were slowly making their way down the road that Hercules and Strife had taken that day. It was the middle of the night and Jason could see the strain Iolaus was under fighting the crutches.

"Do you want to take a break, Iolaus?" he finally asked, coughing.

The blond shook his head. "Not me, why? You want to rest?" he asked, his voice lacking his usual cocky edge. In truth, Iolaus had noticed Jason's continued coughing ever since they had started walking. Neither knew what it was that Discord had used on him, but it had done more damage than Jason was willing to admit.

"No, I'm fine," the prince responded. With that, they pressed on through the night, watching as the Escala Mountains loomed larger in the distance.

The pink streaks of dawn were just streaking across the sky when the two tired and injured cadets saw an old man standing in the road ahead of them. They approached the traveler with little notice, other than moving to avoid him when they reached him.

They had just walked past him when they heard him speak. "You must go to the Escala Mountains."

Iolaus and Jason turned and looked at the man. "Are you talking to us?" Jason asked, aware that no one else was there.

The man nodded. "Come on, Jase," Iolaus said, pressing forward. "We have to keep going."

"Yes, you do," the man said. "You must go to the Escala Mountains."

"I'm sure you mean well," Iolaus said, impatiently. "But that's already where we're headed."

"Yes, but where will you go when you reach them, Iolaus?" the man asked.

Iolaus turned slowly to face the man, and Jason asked, "How did you know his name?"

The man sighed, "The same way I know yours, Prince Jason of Corinth."

"So if you know so much about where we're supposed to go, why don't you enlighten us," Iolaus commented dryly.

The man nodded, "There is a cavern, hidden deep within the mountains. It is called the Hoffen Cavern, and within it is something you must have."

"What's that?" Jason asked.

"You will see once you reach there," the traveler said shortly.

Iolaus shook his head, "And how are we supposed to know we've got the right cave? Or what to do with what we find there?"

The older man smiled, "You will just know."

"How is this supposed to help Hercules?" Jason asked. When the man didn't say anything, he pressed on, "How do you know all of this?"

Instead of replying, the man disappeared in a flash of brilliant white light. "Uh, Jase . . ." Iolaus stammered. "Was that?"

A voice interrupted Iolaus' question, saying "I'm afraid that this is out of godly hands now. Only you can save my son."

The two cadets turned to stare at each other, shock written across both of their features. "Zeus," Iolaus finished his aborted statement. "We've gotta go," Iolaus added, redoubling his speed on his crutches.

"Right behind you," Jason said, catching up to Iolaus as they hurried toward the Escala Mountains.

Drifting in and out of sleep as best he could, Hercules soon lost

track of the time that he was suspended over the lava flow. Whenever he was awake, he continued to look for some way to escape, and hope that his friends were still safe.

One time that he had been pulled from a restless sleep by a loud noise, he awoke to find that Discord was again gone. His immediate fear was that she had gone back for Iolaus and Jason, to finish the job. However, he was relieved when she soon returned and he learned that she had indeed left them alone.

It was a similar loss in consciousness that Hercules was shaken from by an angry voice echoing loudly through the cavern. "What have you two done?" Dust flaked off of the stone walls at the force of the voice.

As Hercules watched, through now alert eyes, Strife sat up suddenly from where he had been sitting against the wall. "Uncle?" he called out in a feeble voice.

A swirl of black smoke, and the leather-clad god of war materialized in the cave. "Who else would it be, Strife?" Ares asked, half disgusted.

"Oh, I don't know . . ." Strife fumbled with a clasp on his vest. "Delivery boy?"

"Do I look like a delivery boy to you?" Ares seethed.

Discord laughed at Strife's predicament. "Not to me, Ares," she purred.

Ares' dark eyes turned on Discord, and stilled her with a look. "Stay out of this Discord. You're next."

"But what did I do?" she whined.

Ares laughed, "Listening to this one," he gestured at Strife, "for starters."

"Humph," Discord muttered, crossing her arms over her chest.

The god of war turned his attention back to Strife. "Care to explain this?"

Strife laughed weakly. "Just a little fun, Uncle."

Ares stalked up to Strife, and grabbed a hold of his vest. "Do you remember the last time you pulled a stunt like this?"

"You mean you don't like what we've done?" Strife asked weakly, glancing up at Hercules.

Laughing, Ares said, "I never said I didn't like the idea of my dear little half-brother clinging to life." A longing quality filled the god's voice as he spoke, letting go of Strife long enough to turn and look at Hercules. "No, I like it very much, actually."

Strife took the opportunity to move away from Ares, and slink along the wall to where Discord was standing. "So what's the problem then?"

"The problem?" Ares asked, turning from looking at Hercules to look back at Strife. "The problem? Are you really so dense?"

"Uncle!" Strife's voice squeaked.

"How does an eternity in Tartarus sound?" Ares yelled into Strife's face.

Strife closed his eyes against the god of war's forceful voice. Blinking slowly, he said, "But Uncle, it was such a great plan! I convinced him I was Zeus, and then . . ."

"Strife," Ares interrupted him calmly.

The weaker god looked up at his uncle nervously. "Yes?"

"Shut up!" the angry god exclaimed. Ares looked over to where Discord had retreated and motioned her over. "You too, over here," he said.

"Why me?" Discord cried pathetically.

The god of war closed his eyes and shook his head. "Because the two of you never act alone. Between the two of you I swear there is only one brain."

"Uncle," Strife whined.

A finger over his mouth, Ares said, "Shh." When the two younger gods were quiet, he continued, "Now. I will deal with you later." Waving a hand in front of his face, he added, "Bye, bye."

With a flick of his wrist both Strife and Discord disappeared from the cave. When they were finally gone, Ares turned his attention back to Hercules. "Now, brother. We're finally alone."

Hercules, who had been fighting to stay completely conscious during the altercation between Ares and his two underlings, focused his eyes on his half-brother. "Are you going to end this or not, Ares?" he asked.

The evil god laughed. "Now why would I want to do that?"

Hercules sighed, "What happened to that threat of Tartarus?"

"That old thing? Athena'd never make it stick," he said pridefully. "Besides, I hate to admit it, but this little scenario that Strife dreamt up is too entertaining to end so soon."

"So what are you going to do then?" Hercules asked. His arms were on fire, and his lungs ached from breathing the vapors that filled the cavern.

Ares grinned broadly, and Hercules cringed. "Nothing."

Hercules shook his head, not sure if he heard his brother right. "Nothing? You're not going to finish what they started? Or torment me some more?"

"Nah," Ares said, shaking his head. "I think I'll just let you hang around for a while."

Seeing an opportunity, however slim, Hercules said, "Taking the cowards way out, Ares?"

"Why, you wound me little brother. I prefer to see it as the spectator's way out." The god smiled almost sweetly.

When the god disappeared in a swirl of smoke, Hercules called out, "Ares!" The only response was his voice echoing around the empty chamber. After a few seconds of listening to his own echo, Hercules muttered, "Great, now how am I supposed to get down from here?"

Spurned on by what Zeus had told them, Iolaus and Jason made good time walking the rest of the way to the Ecsala Mountains. The road worsened, however, the farther into the mountain range they ventured.

"How much further to this cave, do you think?" Jason asked, breaking the silence that had surrounded them for some time.

Iolaus shrugged as best he could while holding onto the crutches. "I hope not far," he said, looking across the mountains. Squinting against the sunlight, he tried to make out any caves hidden among the hills.

"It's not like he gave us much to go on," Jason observed with a cough.

Iolaus glanced over at Jason. "Are you okay?"

"What?" Jason asked, glancing over at Iolaus. "What are you talking about?"

Iolaus paused long enough to stretch his elbows and hobbled along behind Jason. "You've been coughing the whole time since Discord zapped you."

"Yeah, and you've been limping," Jason observed dryly. "So?"

Iolaus shook his head, "Okay, Jase. Whatever you say." They had only been walking for a few more minutes when Iolaus said, "Hey, look!"

Jason looked in the direction that Iolaus was pointing. "Do you think that's the right cave?" When Iolaus didn't respond, he looked back at the younger cadet. "Iolaus?"

"That's it," Iolaus whispered.

Jason looked at his friend, concerned. "How do you know?"

Iolaus shrugged, "I just do."

"Are you sure that tree didn't hit you on the head?" Jason asked.

"Come on, Jase," Iolaus argued. "You remember what Zeus said. That we

would just know when we found it."

"And you think that's the right place?"

The blond nodded, "I know it is."

Jason looked at Iolaus, uncertain, "How?"

Iolaus didn't answer, and instead pushed past Jason and began slowly walking over the scattered rocks on the mountainside. "You coming?" he called over his shoulder.

"Makes as much sense as anything here lately," Jason muttered, following Iolaus' trail.

Iolaus' injured leg made the journey across the rough terrain longer than it would have been otherwise, but neither cadet commented on it. Instead, they focused on finding whatever was inside the Hoffen Cavern that could save Hercules.

Just before they reached the entrance to the cave, Iolaus asked, "What kind of name is Hoffen, anyway? It sounds strange."

"The gods are involved, Iolaus," Jason replied, helping Iolaus over a large rock. "It would sound strange if anything actually made sense, don't you think?"

"Huh, yeah," Iolaus replied when he finally reached level ground. "You're probably right."

Once inside the cave, they were struck by how little the bright light from outside filtered into the shadowed depths. Finding an old torch on the wall, Jason struggled to light it while Iolaus explored around the cave.

Finally lighting the torch, Jason walked toward the back of the cavern. "It looks like there's a passage back here," he commented over his shoulder.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Iolaus asked impatiently.

Holding the torch out in front, Jason and Iolaus continued to walk deeper into the passage. Some time later, Jason stopped walking, causing Iolaus to almost collide into his back. "Jason? What are you stopping for?"

"Shh," the dark-haired cadet said. "Do you hear that?"

Iolaus tilted his head to the side, listening. "Sounds like water," he said finally.

"That's it," Jason declared, turning to face Iolaus. "That's what we're looking for."

The younger cadet looked at Jason skeptically. "I don't know, Jase. Seems kinda odd."

Jason shook his head. "Don't you see? You knew that this cave was where we were going. You said yourself you didn't know how."

"And?" Iolaus asked, still not convinced.

Jason held back a sigh, "And that's how I know that water is what we're here for."

Iolaus looked at Jason for a minute before saying, "Okay, if that's what you think. Let's do it."

Jason nodded. "All right. It sounds like it's coming from this direction," he said before turning down a tunnel on the left.

They followed the rushing noise of the water until they entered a large chamber. On the far side of the room was a fast-flowing river. "Looks like this is the right place," Iolaus commented.

"How much do you think we'll need?" Jason asked, jogging across the cavern.

Following Jason's path, albeit more slowly, Iolaus observed, "You should be asking how are we supposed to carry it."

"You're right," Jason agreed, scanning the interior of the chamber. "Wait, there's something," he added. Wedging the torch in a crack in the rock a good distance from the water, he ran to the back wall of the cavern. Holding it up to show Iolaus, he asked, "What do you think?"

"Looks like a vase," Iolaus responded. "Why would someone leave a vase down here?"

Jason shook his head, "I don't know, but it'll work."

Several minutes later, Jason had just finished carefully filling the container when Iolaus asked, "So where do we go now?"

Sitting the vase of water next to the torch, Jason looked around the cave. "I have no idea. What do you think? Geography is more your thing."

Suddenly Iolaus felt the air stir as if a light breeze had picked up. It whispered in his ear, as the young cadet's sight fell onto a concealed passage in the back of the cavern. "Did you hear that?" he asked Jason.

"Hear what?" Jason asked, glancing over at Iolaus.

Iolaus looked at the almost hidden passage and Jason. "Never mind. That's what we're looking for," he said, pointing at the tunnel.

Picking up the torch and vase, Jason half-laughed, "I'm not even going to bother asking how you know."

Iolaus grinned, "I guess a little birdie told me."

"Yep," Jason said over his shoulder. "That tree definitely hit you on the head."

"Time to save Herc's butt," Iolaus noted.

Jason laughed weakly, "Again."

Following the winding corridor through the mountain, Iolaus was growing less certain of what he thought he had heard. Before he could voice his concern, Jason called out, "I think there's another cavern up ahead."

Iolaus' doubts faded almost completely when they entered the new cavern. Leaving the passage that they had been walking through for close to an hour, they emerged into a cave lit from the outside. "Okay, so what next?" Iolaus asked absent-mindedly.

"Maybe outside?" Jason asked, walking over to the entrance. Jason squinted against the sudden light, but returned inside only to say, "I didn't see anything out there. What about one of those tunnels?"

Iolaus looked over at the passages, "Yeah, but which one?"

"We can't afford to guess wrong," Jason noted. Rubbing the back of his hand over his eyes, he added, "Not to mention that I can't see after going outside."

"It's that one," Iolaus said, pointing at the second of the four passages.

Jason shifted the torch in his grasp, looking down the tunnel. "Another birdie?" Jason asked.

Shaking his head, and walking toward the tunnel, Iolaus replied with a smirk, "No, there's a light coming from inside it."

"They all look the same to me," Jason admitted.

"City-boy," Iolaus muttered with a small laugh.

Jason jogged to catch up with Iolaus, again coughing. "I heard that, Shorty."

"I know," Iolaus laughed. "You're blind, not deaf."

When Hercules began to hear voices, he was sure he was hallucinating. His arms had been numb so long he couldn't remember when it has started; and the burning in this throat told him that although he might not be as susceptible to the vapors as a full mortal, he wasn't immune to them.

The closer the voices seemed to come, the more distinct they became and he realized that it was Iolaus and Jason. Hercules was hit with relief and dismay at the thought. It was a chance to get away, but he clearly remembered what Strife had said about the effect of the lava's steam on mortals.

When Iolaus and Jason walked into the chamber where Hercules was, they stopped dead in their tracks at the sight of him suspended over a lava flow. "Hold on, Herc," Iolaus called, hobbling over to the side of the lava. "We'll get you down."

"Guys, you have to listen to me," Hercules said quickly.

Not listening, Jason quickly walked over to the edge of the lava. Looking at the container of water in his hand, he was suddenly struck by an idea. "Hey, Iolaus. I think I know what the water is for."

"Hey!" Hercules yelled, grabbing Jason and Iolaus' attention. "You two have to leave."

Iolaus' mouth dropped open. "What do you mean we have to leave? Who else do you think is going to save you?"

Coughing, Jason assured him, "Just give us a little while, Hercules, we'll get you down."

"No!" Hercules protested. "You don't understand. The steam from the lava, it's poison."

"We're not leaving you," Iolaus said defiantly.

Hercules closed his eyes, "You have to."

"No," Jason managed around a sudden coughing fit.

"You see?" Hercules asked, "You're already getting sick."

Iolaus glanced over at Jason, "No, he's just finding out what it was that Discord was up to in the first place."

"Discord did get to you?" Hercules asked.

Jason shot Iolaus a look that told him to keep quiet. "Let's get to work on a way to get him down, Iolaus."

Iolaus nodded in agreement and they set to work, ignoring Hercules' protests. "Listen to me. You have to leave."

"Did you hear something?" Iolaus asked.

Jason tilted his head to the side as he tossed a length of rope over a rock outcropping. "Just the wind, I think."

"Maybe my birdie is back," Iolaus commented.

Jason laughed, testing the rope's strength. "Let's hope not."

"I'll have you know my little birdie friend is very helpful, Jason."

Tying a double loop, in the end of the rope nearest the lava, Jason dead-panned, "That's what worries me."

"Why won't the two of you listen to me?" Hercules tried again.

Double checking the ropes, Jason said, "Now we just have to decide who's swinging after him."

"I'll do it," Iolaus said.

Jason coughed, "Not with your leg."

"Exactly with my leg, Jase. I can't anchor the rope back here, and you're already coughing badly enough without swinging out over that," he said, gesturing at the lava flow.

Hercules sighed, "How about neither one of you swings out here?"

"Shut up," the two cadets called in unison, turning to look up at their stubborn friend.

"Hop over here," Jason said, holding up the rope. Slinging one of the loops over Iolaus' head, he added, "Get settled in here, I'm going to use the water."

Iolaus tightened the rope under his arms. "What do you mean you're going to use the water?" he asked, looking at Jason.

Meanwhile, Jason poured the water into the lava flow. What happened next surprised all three of the cadets. Slowly, the lava began to cool, and steam less. In the end, the lava solidified, even though he had only poured in a small amount.

Rushing back over to the rope, Jason began to hoist Iolaus up into the air. "We have to hurry, who knows how long it will last."

Within seconds, Iolaus was in the air and attempting to swing out to Hercules. A particularly bad coughing spell caused Iolaus to glance back at Jason in concern. "Can you hold it?" the blond called out.

"I'm fine," Jason responded, short of breath. "Just go."

After a few swings to gain momentum, Iolaus finally reached out far enough to grab a hold of Hercules. "Nice to see you, Iolaus," Hercules said, "but why won't you listen to me and get out of here?"

"Would you run out on me, Herc?" Iolaus asked, hurt. "I don't think so. Now shut up and let us help you."

"Iolaus . . ." Not replying to Hercules, Iolaus pulled out his knife, and began to cut through the rope that bound Hercules' hands together. "Uh, Iolaus?" Hercules tried to grip the main rope that hung from the ceiling, but his hands and arms wouldn't cooperate.

Iolaus shifted his grip on the rope that was suspended from the ceiling, asking, "What, Herc?"

"I'm slipping," he managed before he began to fall, frantically trying to get a grip on the rope with his long-numb hands.

"Iolaus!" Jason yelled from the ground, panicked.

"Damn," Iolaus cried. Reaching out he grabbed onto Hercules with one arm, the other hand still holding the stationary rope. "I forgot the loop," he muttered. Having been distracted when he reached Hercules,

he had forgotten to pull the second loop around his friend.

To pull the extra loop around Hercules, Iolaus had to free the hand that was holding his friend over the rock. "Grab the extra loop, Herc," Iolaus said through clenched teeth. Hercules managed to control his arms well enough to snag the dangling rope. "Now pull it over your head," Iolaus instructed.

Hercules did what Iolaus said as quickly as he could, but it seemed to take an eternity to both Iolaus and Jason. "Hurry up, guys," Jason's strained voice broke through the silence. "I don't think that water is going to hold much longer."

Iolaus glanced back at where Jason was struggling to hold the rope that helped support the two friends weight. An idea entered his mind and was reinforced when Jason began coughing again. "Herc," Iolaus said. "Hold onto the rope."

"What are you doing?" the demigod asked.

Getting a better hold on the suspended rope, Iolaus slipped out of the loop that was around his chest. "Taking you back home in one piece, that's what," he said. Before Hercules could respond, he let go of the confused cadet and pushed him toward the safety of solid ground.

On the ground, Jason was watching what was going on and feeling just as confused as Hercules. His muscles had been straining under the weight of his two friends, even though Iolaus was still holding onto the other rope. Jason wasn't sure how he was going to pull them back across the lava, but knew he would do it no matter what.

In the end, it wasn't a choice he was left to make. The suddenness with which Hercules glided across the distance surprised the young prince. He countered for the loss in weight just in time to keep Hercules from landing on the fast softening lava.

"What do you think you're doing?" Jason called out to Iolaus as he untied Hercules from the rope.

Iolaus, who was struggling to maintain his grip on the rope replied, "I think it's called noble."

While Jason threw the rope back across the lava, Hercules collapsed on the ground, still unable to feel his arms. "I say it's called stupid," he muttered under his breath, watching iolaus' struggle closely.

When Iolaus grabbed onto the loop of rope that Jason had thrown, his grip on the other rope slipped and in an instant he was falling toward the again flowing lava. "Jason!" he managed to call out before the rope went taut, suspending him just above the lava's surface.

On the shore, Jason was struggling to pull Iolaus up and back to safety. "Hold on," he managed through clenched teeth, pulling on the rope. Once Iolaus was some distance above the surface, Jason said, "Try to swing across."

Hercules stood up to try and help Jason, but merely succeeded in

collapsing when he tried to take a single step. He was forced to watch as Jason struggled with rescuing Iolaus.

"Almost there," Jason said to Iolaus, pulling another length of rope toward him.

"Easy for you to say," Iolaus muttered, sparing a glance at the lava. Although trying not to breathe too much of the fumes from the lava, the blond cadet felt a cough forming in his lungs. "We have to get out of here," he added.

"That's what I was trying to tell you," Hercules said from where he was sitting. "The vapors, they'll kill you."

Jason finished pulling Iolaus from the lava, and with one last swing he was safe on the solid rock. "They haven't killed us yet," Iolaus managed around a groan when he accidentally put weight on his injured knee.

"I'll get your crutches," Jason said. However, before he could reach them, he doubled over in a coughing fit. Every time he tried to regain his breath, it made the coughing worse.

Iolaus and Hercules watched Jason in concern. "Jason? You still with us?" Hercules asked, cringing at the words.

Jason nodded, and managed to stand back up. A few seconds later, Iolaus was again standing on his crutches and Jason walked over to Hercules. "Let me help you up," the prince said.

"I can make it," Hercules said.

Shaking his head, Jason said, "I saw you fall over earlier. You're not immune to these vapors either, Hercules."

"Maybe not," Hercules observed, "but you're reacting to the poison worst of all. How do you think you can help me walk?"

Jason grinned, an odd sight under the circumstances. "I guess I'll just have to be as stubborn as you are."

"Not funny, Jason," Hercules protested as Jason pulled one of Hercules' arms around his shoulders. In the end, Jason helped Hercules to walk through the dark passage. Iolaus walked just ahead of his two friends as they slowly made their way toward the exit.

"Now can we get the hades out of here?" Iolaus commented.

"How are we going to make it down this mountain?" Jason asked when they reached the exit to the outside world.

Iolaus took a deep breath, "I don't know, but it's nice to breathe fresh air again."

Jason nodded, fighting a cough. "Tell me about it."

In the short time it took them to walk to the outside, Jason had noticed Hercules growing heavier and heavier. A quick glance at him in the dim moonlight revealed what he had suspected. The demigod had

given up to exhaustion and passed out.

"So what are we going to do with sleeping beauty here?" Iolaus asked, glancing at Hercules.

Jason looked around the cave. "I'd say we should stay here, but there's nothing to build a fire with." After a pause, he asked, "Can you make it down the mountain in the dark with those crutches?"

"Are you kidding?" Iolaus laughed, "I'm a pro with these things by now. What about you? Can you carry Herc that far?"

Jason situated Hercules' form over his shoulder. "Do I have a choice?" A second later, he added, "I'm fine. I just want to leave these mountains."

"You and me both," Iolaus said, slowly beginning to make his way through the rocks.

It was several torturous hours later that the two cadets and their sleeping burden finally reached the main road. "We should make camp soon," Jason said as soon as they were clear of the mountains and back into the more familiar forest.

"There's a river not far from here," Iolaus said. "That'll work." Looking over his shoulder at Jason, Iolaus added, "And the sooner the better from the looks of it."

"I'm fine," Jason insisted, stifling a cough.

Iolaus concentrated on limping down the road. "Yeah, sure you are." It was only several moments later that Iolaus added, "The river should be right through there."

Jason squinted through the dark forest, but couldn't see anything. "If you say so."

"I say so," Iolaus replied. "Trust me."

Jason laughed, truly laughed for the first time since the whole ordeal started. "Coming from you, Iolaus, those words aren't exactly comforting."

"Why, Jason, I'm hurt."

Coughing, Jason pressed on, laughing. "You're hurt? You're not toting the half-god paper-weight here."

"At least Discord didn't hit you with a tree," Iolaus complained.

Jason rolled his eyes, "No, the way to say that is at least I didn't jump in front of the tree. You did."

"Well," Iolaus scoffed. "See if I try to save the royal butt anymore."

Reaching the water's edge, Jason carefully laid Hercules down and went in search of firewood. Iolaus, in the meantime, tried to refill

the waterskins, and narrowly avoided falling into the river when one of his crutches slipped out from under him.

Seeing Iolaus' close call, Jason laughed. "Please don't fall in."

"What?" Iolaus asked, limping back to where Hercules was still sleeping.

"There should be a rule. Until you give in and learn how to swim, no going near any water," Jason said with a grin, piling up the branches he had collected.

Iolaus shook his head, dropping the now filled waterskins onto the ground. "Well, as long as you don't get any bright ideas about tossing me in again anytime soon," he looked pointedly at the crown prince, "we should all be okay."

"Sure, Iolaus," Jason laughed.

Once they had finished setting up the makeshift camp, the coolness of the night began to seep through the warm cadets. The interior of the cave had been sweltering, and the walk to the campsite had kept them warm ever since. Once still, however, they were forced to build a fire.

"Chieron's never going to believe this one," Jason said while staring at the fire.

Iolaus laughed, "Especially if I tell him."

Jason glanced over at where Hercules was still asleep. He laughed, looking at Iolaus. "And I thought you were a challenge to look after. That boy takes the cake."

"Yeah," Iolaus said. A second later, realization crossed his face and he added quickly, "Hey, wait. What do you mean _ a challenge to look after? Since when do you have to look after me?"

"Since when do we not?" Jason laughed.

Iolaus pretended to be offended. "You act like I get in a lot of trouble or something." He had managed to keep a straight face until he saw the disbelieving look that Jason gave him. "Okay, so I get in a little trouble now and then."

"A little?" Jason exclaimed. "Have you lost your memory lately?"

"I don't think so . . . Wait," he paused, looking at Jason. "Who are you?" A quick glance around the camp, and he continued, "Where am I?"

Jason rubbed his hands over his face, and yawned. "You're hopeless, Iolaus."

"So what do you think we should tell him?" Iolaus asked, looking across the fire at Hercules, suddenly serious.

"About what?" Jason asked, muffling a cough.

Iolaus looked at Jason in shock. "About what? About meeting his dad. Think about it, Jason."

"I have," the prince admitted. "I'm not sure we should tell him."

"What?" Iolaus exclaimed. When Hercules stirred, the blond lowered his voice. "What do you mean we shouldn't tell him? He has a right to know, Jason."

"Maybe it would do more harm than good," Jason said quietly. "Think about it, Iolaus. Look at what all he does because of Zeus. You try telling him that Zeus talked to us and won't talk to him."

Iolaus shook his head, "It's not right keeping it from him, Jase."

"Jason is correct, Iolaus. If a bit misguided in his reasons," said a disembodied voice.

Iolaus and Jason glanced quickly around the small clearing, both uneasy. "Zeus?" the blond asked tentatively.

A radiant flash of light lit up the clearing, and when both Jason and Iolaus were able to see again, Zeus was sitting next to the campfire. "Yes, Iolaus, it is I," he said.

"Why are you here?" Iolaus asked. "If you think Jason is right to not tell him, why come back at all?"

The two cadets watched as Zeus looked sadly over at his son. "I know that Hercules thinks I don't care about him, or that I don't see him." The king of the gods turned his attention back to the other cadets. "He's wrong in thinking that."

"Then why don't you tell him that, and not us?" Jason asked.

The god lowered his head for a moment before speaking. "There will come a time when I will be able to speak to him as a father would speak to a son. But now is not that time."

"Some excuse," Iolaus muttered, for the moment not caring if he offended the king of the gods.

"I know how it sounds, Iolaus," Zeus replied, his voice almost soft. "What Hercules needs is to learn to appreciate his mortal blessings, and not be so concerned with the godly blessings his heritage grants him. Those will come in their own time."

"But why?" Iolaus continued to protest.

Zeus smiled. "Because devotion, such as the two of you have shown, is a greater gift than any I can give him."

"I don't think Hercules would agree with you," Jason observed, still coughing faintly.

"The three of you are inexplicably bound to one another," Zeus explained. "The loyalty that you share goes beyond any immortal strength." He paused, reading the confused glances from the two young

men. "I know that you are too young to understand this now, but one day each of you will come to realize the truth in what I have just told you."

"But what does that have to do with Herc?" Iolaus asked. He was confused by everything Zeus was saying, and how it applied to what was happening.

The god laughed, "Maybe something, maybe nothing. Just an old man rambling, I suppose." He paused for a moment before adding "Just promise me that one day you'll remember this conversation."

"Sure, Zeus," Jason said, still uncertain.

Iolaus tilted his head to the side. "There's something else I'm curious about," the blond said.

Zeus studied the young cadet closely. "And what is that, Iolaus?"

"When Herc left with you, or whoever, how were we able to follow them?"

Iolaus paused, and Jason picked up where his friend left off. "If Discord stopped us, that means the gods were involved. Why didn't the just zap Hercules into the cave? Why give us a chance to follow at all?"

"Strife and Discord were behind this, true," Zeus admitted. "However, part of the fun, as Strife saw it, was convincing Hercules to go willingly. Your following them was simply an inevitable action that Strife overlooked."

"I thought a god couldn't interfere in another god's plans," Iolaus asked.

Zeus chuckled, "Strife will learn not to impersonate me."

"So you were able to talk to us then," Jason offered.

The god nodded. "You would have saved him had I helped you or not. The nature of what is in your hearts cannot be changed."

Iolaus added sarcastically, "Tell that to the magistrate back in Thebes."

"Well," Zeus commented, "if there was no mischief, Hermes would be rather bored. Don't you think?"

"Don't forget thieves," Jason added.

"Jason?" Iolaus asked. When the prince looked at him with a smile on his face, Iolaus said dryly, "Don't do me any favors here."

Jason laughed, "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Oh, I have no doubt," the blond replied.

"Now," Zeus laughed, interrupting their banter. When two sets of tired eyes turned their attention back to Zeus, he said, "I believe

it is time for the two of you to sleep." He then waved his hand in front of the two cadets.

Iolaus and Jason were soon fast asleep, and Zeus watched over the three boys for some time. In the end, he waved his hand over each of them, removing the poisoned vapors from their lungs. He started to fix Iolaus' knee, but knew that might lead to too many questions and regrettably left it alone.

Kneeling next to his son, Zeus whispered, "You don't have to try so hard to impress me, Hercules. You always have. Someday, I'll be able to tell you that face to face.

"In the meantime," he continued, "appreciate what you have right here on earth. You and your two friends are each guardians of each other." He stopped speaking and stood up, just before he vanished, he whispered, "Remember that, and no road that the three of you travel will ever be too long."

The End

End
file.